

217

25X1

OCI No. 0486/76
April 3, 1976

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Polisario Front

The Algerian-backed Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro) has become a significant guerrilla force capable of mounting harassing operations in southern Morocco and northern Mauritania, as well as Western (former Spanish) Sahara. Estimates of the number of Polisario guerrillas range from 1,000 to more than 5,000; we estimate the figure to be between 2,000 and 3,000. A number of these partisans were recruited from indigenous nomad troops and territorial police that were disbanded when Spain left its former territory.

The Front depends heavily on Algeria for arms, training, supplies, and financial support; some Algerian military personnel are accompanying the guerrillas in combat operations. A substantial increase in guerrilla operations could occur only as part of an Algerian move to up the ante in its dispute with Morocco over the Sahara. Prior to mid-1974, when King Hassan intensified his efforts to acquire the Sahara, the Front got most of its arms from Libya, which continues to provide some weapons and financial support through Algeria.

The guerrillas, although no match for Moroccan and Mauritanian forces in conventional fighting, continue to carry out sabotage and hit-and-run attacks over a wide area. In addition to small arms, the guerrillas have used mortars, machine guns, grenade launchers, and occasionally SA-7 surface-to-air-missiles in skirmishes with Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. So long as the Front has Algerian backing, it can continue a war of attrition indefinitely. Morocco can contain, but not eliminate, Polisario harassment.

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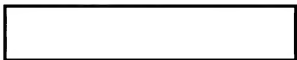
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The bulk of Polisario partisans are Reguibat tribesmen, one of the most powerful of the Saharan peoples. They traditionally have followed a nomadic lifestyle, ranging with their camels across wide expanses of southern Morocco, Algeria, Sahara, and Mauritania. They are known for their ferocity, pride, and ability with firearms and have dominated the eastern part of the territory for a considerable period of time. The Reguibat--possibly including some of the present Polisario leadership--were prominently involved in anti-Spanish demonstrations in the territorial capital of El Aaiun in 1970.

The Front first came to notice as an active insurgent group in May 1973, when it attacked a Spanish frontier post along the Moroccan-Saharan border. The organization appears to be the successor of an earlier Saharan political movement that opposed Spanish control of the territory.

Sporadic Polisario incidents against isolated Spanish outposts in the interior continued throughout 1974 and 1975. Following the tripartite agreement signed in Madrid last November, providing for a phased turnover of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania, Spanish forces gradually withdrew to a 70-mile defense perimeter around El Aaiun. The guerrillas moved into the resulting vacuum, operating throughout much of northeastern and southern Sahara. As first Moroccan, and later Mauritanian, troops moved into the territory, Polisario guerrillas directed their attacks against these forces. Until late January, when Morocco began extensive sweep operations against the guerrillas, the Front held several towns. The Polisario has since been forced to abandon virtually all of its fixed strongpoints in the Sahara, but the Front continues to wage guerrilla warfare in the more remote desert regions of the interior.

Most Polisario militants are Reguibats and other indigenous Saharans, and some of the Front's known leaders, including Secretary General Mustafa Siyed el Ouali, reportedly were Saharan students who attended law school in Morocco. There are probably a significant number of Mauritians as well. The most prominent Mauritanian is Baba Miske, a former diplomat, who frequently appears as a



25X1

Polisario spokesman. Many Saharan tribes probably have more in common with the Mauritaniens than the Moroccans. The Hassaniya Arabic spoken in much of the area is nearly identical to that spoken in Mauritania and quite different from the Maghrebi Arabic spoken in Morocco.

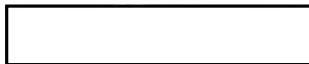


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Recently, the Polisario Front seems to have been concentrating on strengthening its shaky political credentials while continuing guerrilla operations against Moroccan and Mauritanian forces. Its provisional Saharan National Council, established last fall, proclaimed the formation of the "Saharan Democratic Arab Republic" on February 27. The announcement was clearly intended to counter the Moroccan-dominated Saharan territorial assembly's unanimous endorsement the day before of a motion to integrate the Sahara into Morocco and Mauritania. In further attempts to gain diplomatic support and delay international recognition of de facto control of the



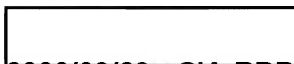
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territory by Morocco and Mauritania, the Front has also announced an eight-man "government" and promulgated a "provisional constitution."

The Polisario controls little territory and has in effect set up a government-in-exile. Algerian and Polisario efforts to obtain recognition of the new Saharan "state" have been less successful than Algiers expected. Rabat's decision on March 7 to sever diplomatic relations with Algiers served as a clear warning to states that value their relations with Morocco not to recognize the new state. Thus far only Algeria, eight other African states, and North Korea have extended diplomatic recognition.



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